



Public Health

Seattle & King County

HEALTHY PEOPLE. HEALTHY COMMUNITIES.

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Health Alert, 22 December 2004: Meningitis Among Gay Men in Vancouver, British Columbia

On December 10, 2004, Canadian health authorities in British Columbia (BC) reported an outbreak of type C meningococcal meningitis among gay men in BC, with 6 cases reported among gay men since October, 2004. To stop the outbreak, the BC Centre for Disease Control recommended meningococcal vaccination for gay men throughout BC, including teenagers. There have been no cases in King County or Washington State related to this outbreak.

According to Canadian health authorities, gay men who may be at higher risk include those who live in or travel to the Lower Mainland or southern Vancouver Island, who have more than one sexual partner, or who are socially active within the gay community. Although very few people exposed to the bacteria will develop meningococcal disease, the infection can be very serious, sometimes causing brain damage or death. **Gay men who will be visiting Vancouver, BC, in the near future should be aware of this outbreak, the symptoms of meningococcal disease, and how to protect themselves.**

Meningococcal disease is caused by a bacterium known as the meningococcus (*Neisseria meningitidis*). Some people carry this germ in their throat or nose without getting sick. In rare instances, the germ overcomes the body's natural defenses, and causes serious diseases, including bacterial meningitis or meningococemia (a widespread infection of the blood and other organs).

The bacteria is spread via saliva through sharing drinks, water bottles, eating utensils, toothbrushes, cigarettes, joints, kissing and sexual contacts where saliva sharing occurs. The bacteria can also be carried in the penis and could be transmitted during oral sex. You can protect yourself by not taking part in activities where saliva is shared, and using a condom during oral sex.

High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningococcal infection, which can develop suddenly. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion and sleepiness. **Persons who develop these symptoms should consult their healthcare provider and/or seek medical care promptly.** Antibiotic treatment can prevent infection in persons who have been in close contact with a known case of meningococcal disease and should be administered as soon as possible after exposure. The incubation period for meningococcal disease is 2-10 days, people who do not become ill after 10 days are no longer at increased risk.

Public Health does not recommend vaccination of visitors to BC and Vancouver against *Neisseria meningitidis*. Gay men who have been socially active in BC recently are not at increased risk for meningococcal disease after the 10 day incubation period. Gay men who feel that their activities in BC may put them at increased risk during the outbreak should discuss the pros and cons of getting the *Neisseria meningitidis* vaccine with their healthcare provider.

- Healthcare providers and the public with questions about meningococcal disease and meningococcal vaccine can call Public Health at 206-296-4774.
- For information about the outbreak in Vancouver, BC, see: <http://www.bccdc.org/>

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